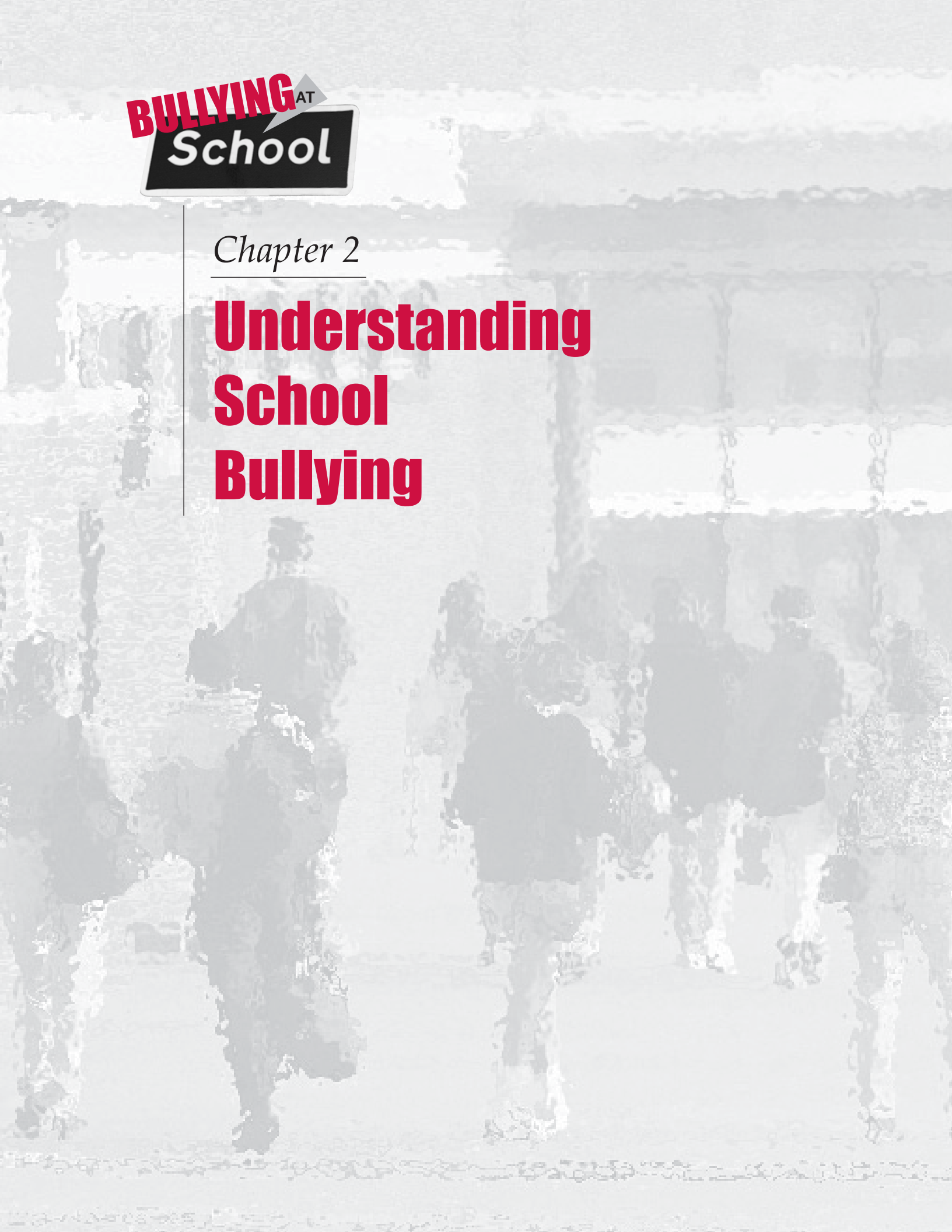**BULLYING** AT
School

Chapter 2

Understanding School Bullying

Understanding School Bullying

O_N a system in which success is measured by an academic yardstick, it is important to understand the effects of school bullying on individual academic achievement. Research indicates that in addition to the negative effects suffered by the direct targets of bullies, witnesses to bullying develop a loss of their sense of security, which reduces learning.[5]

Studies also reveal that students who consciously avoid harm at school are expending energy that could otherwise be devoted to learning. The conclusion of a study published by the National Center for Education Statistics states that "by improving student safety at school, American youth can redirect their concerns to schoolwork and student activities."[6]

Other studies conclude that bullies themselves are also at risk of deficits in learning. A report published in the *Irish Journal of Psychology* states that elementary students who perpetrated acts of bullying attended school less frequently and were more at risk of dropping out of school.[7] In addition, the previously cited article in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that school bullying is a serious and chronic problem for schools. The article supports the growing idea that bullying affects the overall mental health of youths exposed to it.[8]

Research on the effects of bullying and bullying incidents documented by members of the school community validate that bullying

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[5] Elizabeth Davies, Kathryn Chandler, and Mary Jo Nolin, *Student Victimization at School.* Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, p. 3 *<http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/getpublist.asp?L1=74&L2=1>*; John H. Hoover and Ronald Oliver, *The Bullying Prevention Handbook: A Guide for Principals, Teachers and Counselors.* Bloomington, Ind.: National Educational Service, 1996.

[6] Kathryn Chandler, et al., *Student Strategies to Avoid Harm at School.* Washington, D.C.: National Center for Education Statistics, 1995, p. 4 *<http://nces.ed.gov/pub95/web/9504.asp>*.

[7] B. J. Byrne, "Bullies and Victims in School Settings with Reference to Some Dublin Schools," *Irish Journal of Psychology,* Vol. 15 (1994), 574–86.

[8] Nansel, et al., "Bullying Behaviors," 2094–2100.

directly and negatively affects student learning. To ensure that schools support students and prepare them to accept academic challenges, schools and communities must be aware of bullying and be proactive about the students' safety and the overall school environment.

Definition of Bullying

D URING their school careers many students are involved with teasing or aggressive behavior as either a perpetrator or a target. School staff must be aware of children's taunts that occur from time to time and acknowledge injured feelings and issues in dispute. Bullying becomes a concern when hurtful or aggressive behavior toward an individual or a group appears to be unprovoked, intentional, and (usually) repeated.

Bullying among youths may take place in a variety of hostile acts that are carried out repeatedly over time. The acts involve a real or perceived imbalance of power, with the more powerful child or group attacking those who are less powerful. Bullying may be *physical* (hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing), *verbal* (taunting, malicious teasing, name calling, threatening), or *psychological* (spreading rumors, manipulating social relationships, or promoting social exclusion, extortion, or intimidation).[9]

To avoid confusion or doubt about what constitutes bullying behavior, researcher Ken Rigby proposes a definition of bullying:

A desire to hurt + a hurtful action + a power imbalance + repetition (typically) + an unjust use of power + evident enjoyment by the aggressor + a sense of being oppressed on the part of the target[10]

In addition to direct and indirect bullying behavior, bullying may be of a sexual nature, motivated by bias or hate, or may be a part of a ritual or ceremony:

Sexual bullying includes many of the actions typical of bullying behavior with the added actions of exhibitionism, voyeurism, sexual propositioning, sexual harassment, and sexual abuse (touching, physical contact, sexual assault).

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[9] *Addressing the Problem of Juvenile Bullying.* Washington, D.C.: Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Fact Sheet #27, 2001 <*http://ojjdp.ncjrs.org/resources/school.html*>.

[10] Ken Rigby, *Defining Bullying: A New Look at an Old Concept.* University of South Australia, Underdale Campus, July 2003 <*http://www.education.unisa.edu.au/bullying*>.

Bias or hate-motivated bullying is a basic bias against or hate for a person or group. If the behavior or incident is *hate-motivated*, it may, in some instances, constitute a *hate crime*. Some examples of *hate-motivated bullying* include taunting one's race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, or physical or mental disabilities. The bullying behavior may also be aggressive, antagonistic, and assaultive.

Hazing is a form of aggressive behavior that usually involves intimidation and humiliation during an initiation process for a club, group, or sports team. It may involve harassment through unnecessary or disagreeable actions that ridicule and embarrass the target and may escalate to actions serious and offensive enough to be declared criminal. *Education Code* Section 32050 specifically defines hazing as activities that cause "bodily danger, physical harm, or personal degradation or disgrace," and Section 48900 specifies hazing as a suspendable or expellable offense.

Influences on Bullying

TYPICALLY, school bullies are aggressive and intensely impulsive, and their behavior may be fueled by their own physical strength or strong social position. However, even if small in stature, male or female bullies given the right skills and social standing can manipulate others. Although no single factor determines bully behavior, several influences may explain why some students bully at school:

Family dynamics (how family members relate to one another) teach important first and enduring lessons for a child. A family that uses bullying as a relationship tool teaches a child that bullying is an acceptable way to relate to others and to get what he/she wants or needs. According to University of Georgia Professor Arthur Horne, children raised in a home where family members use "put-downs," sarcasm, and criticism, or where they are subjected to repeated frustration or rejection, or where they are witnesses to the abuse of another family member come to believe the world is hostile and see striking back as their only means of survival.[11]

Media images and messages influence the way one perceives bullying. Bullying and harassment are often portrayed as humorous or as acceptable behavior. Some examples of ways in which media glorify bullying include "reality TV," some talk shows, "shock jocks" on the radio, and popular movies and video games—all of which use

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[11] Arthur M. Horne, Dawn A. Newman, and Christi L. Bartolomucci, *Bully Busters: A Teacher's Manual for Helping Bullies, Victims, and Bystanders.* Champaign, Ill.: Research Press, 2000.

embarrassment, humiliation, and the destruction of others as "entertainment."

Images of violence in the media may also be seen as a justification for violent and abusive behavior in real-life relationships. Psychologist David Perry of Florida Atlantic University believes that youths see images or popular role models in the media that support the idea that success can be achieved by being aggressive.[12]

Peer norms can actively or passively promote the idea that bullying is "no big deal." It is typical for peers to stand by during an incident of bullying and, through their silence, indirectly conspire with the bully. Secondary targets may ignore and avoid the bully situation to protect themselves. Sometimes, both perpetrators and bystanders believe that bullying may teach the target how he/she should behave within the established norms.

Technology has made it possible for bullies to exert power by using cyberspace. By using the Internet to communicate and socialize, bullies can deliver hurtful images or messages, threats, and obscenities easily and effortlessly and, at the same time, gain the attention of a bystander audience. With the immediate and anonymous qualities of the Internet, bullies can perpetrate acts of bullying that they would never consider doing in person. Bullies can anonymously post obscene comments about the target and his/her family or friends and post photographs with invitations to others who visit the site to add comments. Some bullies maintain posted hit lists and make use of online e-mail, text messaging, and telephone message and answering systems.

A *school's culture* can contribute to or cultivate bullying behavior if the school community chooses to ignore obvious signs or is truly naive about what can happen in unsupervised hallways and playgrounds. Deliberately hurtful actions can easily affect individual students and escalate to serious safety issues on campus.

Gender and Bullying

ALL youths, regardless of gender, have a strong desire to be accepted and to belong. Although many expectations of behaviors based on gender have been challenged in the recent past, expectations and standards for behavior still exist for both girls and boys. Being perceived as outside these standards may be costly to students developing self-concepts or those who live by standards fashioned in another culture.

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[12] David Perry, "How Is Aggression Learned?" *School Safety* (Fall 1987), p. 25.

Swedish researcher Dan Olweus estimates that 15 percent of all students are involved in some form of violence as a bully or a victim.[13] For many people the prevalence of this phenomena feeds the notion that school bullying is a natural part of growing up.

William Pollack, clinical psychology professor at Harvard Medical School, wrote two books based on many hours of in-depth discussion with boys in America about sensitive life issues, including bullying. He discusses what he describes as a "boy code" that interferes with boys' ability to effectively communicate. He also believes that in boys there is a tendency to especially harass other boys who do not meet the "macho" expectations of what a "man" should be.[14]

In his studies Professor Olweus noted that although direct physical attacks are typically three to four times more likely to come from boys, girls often demonstrate great cruelty in more subtle forms of harassment. Girls are generally more likely to use methods that would affect the social standing of a target, such as exclusion, manipulation of friendships, or spreading of rumors.[15]

Effects of Bullying

A target or victim of school bullying can be expected to experience a variety of emotions: fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, helplessness, humiliation, loneliness, and feelings of isolation and persecution. These emotions can be detected by the student's sudden or ongoing illness, mood swings, withdrawal, inability to concentrate, loss of interest in school, argumentativeness, increased involvement in fights, change in friends and social groups, avoidance of lunch and recess areas, display of suspicious bruises and scratches, and frequent loss of money or property.

If left unattended, the targeted student may go on to develop attendance or discipline problems, fail at school, or even attempt suicide. The student may totally withdraw from family and friends and believe he/she is personally to blame for what has happened. The student may eventually begin to bully others or display other violent or retaliatory acts or may run away from home.

A student who has been the target of bullying and those who have witnessed a bullying incident often hesitate or fail to report it to anyone. Students do not report because they dread being

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[13] Dan Olweus, *Bullying at School: What We Know and What We Can Do.* Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1993, p. 1.

[14] William S. Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood.* New York: Guilford Publications, Inc., 1995.

[15] Olweus, *Bullying at School,* p. 19.

perceived as tattletales by their peers, parents, or teachers. They also believe adults will not understand the situation, will breach the confidence, or will not know how to handle the situation. Some targeted students may also believe they have done something to deserve the abuse.

Bullying behavior may be short-circuited by a school-based bullying prevention program, peer norms that do not tolerate bullying, or a system of social support. A bully may meet a caring adult who mentors him/her. Consequently, student attitudes and relationship skills are improved and aggressive behaviors diminish. However, without intervention and support, a bully will continue to bully and may practice other types of antisocial behavior, such as vandalism, shoplifting, dropping out of school, or using drugs and alcohol.

Professor Olweus' research suggests that bullying can lead to criminal behavior later in life. His research shows that 60 percent of males who were bullies in grades six through nine were convicted of at least one crime as adults compared with 23 percent of males who did not bully. Further, 35 to 40 percent of these former bullies had three or more convictions by age twenty-four compared with 10 percent of males who did not bully.[16]

Adult may also be bullies. In schools some teachers, office staff, bus drivers, school security personnel, and even parent volunteers use tactics ranging from sarcasm to severe bullying as a means of disciplining students or maintaining power in the school setting. Like the student bully, the adult perpetrator often disregards the hurtfulness of his/her actions or blames the target for overreacting or not being able to "take it."

Bullying behavior permeates the school setting in much the same way that it does in families. For example, coaches who socially ostracize or humiliate a student in front of others may believe they are motivating or disciplining the student. However, students who are embarrassed in front of others are being bullied. When adults are allowed to bully students, bullying appears to be acceptable behavior.

Adults also overlook bullying when they condone mistreatment by students who harass or haze younger students or who use derogatory language or label groups of students. Allowing students to engage in casual cruelty, sexual harassment, hateful or bias-based behavior on campus or in extracurricular clubs or sports programs gives the perception that bullying is an acceptable, sanctioned tradition.

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[16] *Addressing the Problem of Juvenile Bullying,* p. 2.